

The Real Problem with *Waiting for “Superman”*

[\[crossposted at HuffPo\]](#)

Waiting for “Superman”, in case you haven’t heard, is the hot new film from *Inconvenient Truth* director Davis Guggenheim. While his last film capitalized on liberal guilt over destroying our planet (and maybe voting for Ralph Nader?), *“Superman”* (yes, the film is weirdly insistent on those unnecessary quotation marks) is for people who feel bad about sending their kids to private school while poor kids wallow in the slums.

“Teaching should be easy,” Guggenheim declares as we watch a cartoon teacher rip open his students’ skulls and pour what looks like blue Spaghetti-O’s inside. (When he closes the skulls the kids sprout wings and fly out the open classroom window.) This is about as close as the film gets to depicting actual teaching. (I checked with the friend who paid for my ticket and he confirmed this scene was meant seriously, though thankfully not literally.)

Despite repeatedly insisting poor kids just need better teachers, the film never says what it is that better teachers actually do. Instead it highlights the voices of American Express pitchman Geoffrey Canada and Bill Gates, whose obsessions with higher standardized test scores have led their schools to cancel recess and art in favor of more hours of scripted memorization. Why bother with art if teaching is just about filling kids’ heads with pre-determined facts?

The real crisis in American education isn’t teachers’ unions preventing incompetent teachers from getting fired (as awful as that may be), it’s the single-minded focus on standardized test scores that underlies everything from Bush’s No Child Left Behind to Obama’s Race to the Top to the charter schools lionized in the film. Real education is about genuine understanding and the ability to figure things out on your own; not about making sure every 7th grader has memorized all the facts some bureaucrats have put in the 7th grade curriculum.

This would be obvious if the film dared to show real teaching in the schools it lauds. Instead of the rich engagement you imagine from progressive private schools, you find teachers who read from assigned scripts while enforcing a regime of zero-tolerance discipline. They’re nightmarish gulags where children’s innate creativity is beaten out of them and replaced with martial order. Because standardized behavior is what makes you do well on standardized tests.

Film is the perfect medium for showing what this life is like. Seeing terrified kids up on the big screen, you can’t help but empathize with them. So we never see it. Instead, the film hides behind charts and graphs and interviews. “When you see a great teacher, you are seeing a work of art,” Geoffrey Canada tells us, but this is something Guggenheim would rather tell than show.

The film has other flaws. It insists all of America’s problems would be solved if only poor kids would memorize more: Pittsburgh is falling apart not because of deindustrialization, but because its schools are filled with bad teachers. American inequality isn’t caused by decades of Reaganite tax cuts and deregulation, but because of too many failing schools. Our trade deficit isn’t a result of structural economic factors but simply because Chinese kids get a better education. Make no mistake, I desperately want every kid to go to a school they love, but it seems far-fetched to claim this would solve all our country’s other problems. At the end of the day, we have an economy that works for the rich by cheating the poor and unequal schools are the result of that, not the cause.

I’m glad a talented filmmaker has decided to draw attention to the horrible inequities in our nation’s schools. But I’m terrified that the solutions put forth by its proponents will only make things worse. We know what happens when we fire teachers who don’t do enough to raise their students’ test scores, or when we adopt more stringent requirements for classroom curriculum: we squeeze out what little genuine education these schools have left. And that’s something we should really feel guilty about.

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